

Get started Bird watching

How would you like to become involved in an enjoyable and challenging outdoor pastime? One that is relatively inexpensive and can be done just about anywhere at anytime. If all this sounds good to you, then welcome to the hobby of bird watching, or “birding” as it is sometimes called.

West Virginia abounds in birdlife. Whether it is our state bird, the cardinal, at a backyard feeder or a red-tailed hawk soaring magnificently above the mountains, birds have a way of capturing our attention and brightening our lives. Getting started in bird watching is easy, and once started, birding will provide a lifetime of fascination and enjoyment.

Equipment

The following equipment is suggested for making the most of your birding experiences:

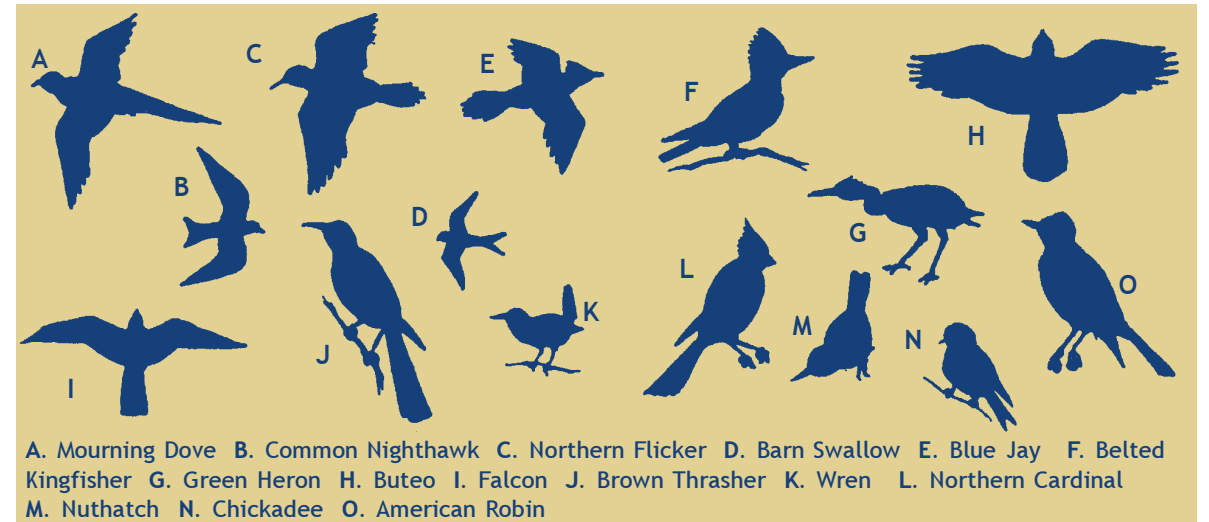
Top Books For Birders:

- **Birding Guide to West Virginia** by The Brooks Bird Club of West Virginia, 1999.
- **West Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas** by Albert R. Buckelew and George A. Hall, 1994.
- **The National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds: East**, 1996.
- **The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Eastern North America**, by David Allen Sibley, 2003.
- **The National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America**, National Geographic Society, 1999.
- **Stokes Field Guide to the Birds, Eastern Region** by Donald and Lillian Stokes, 1996.
- **Peterson Field Guide to the Eastern Birds** by Roger Tory Peterson, 1980.
- **WV DNR Educational brochures -For The Birds...Feeding Birds in Your Backyard, Neotropical Migratory Birds of West Virginia, How To Attract Cavity Nesters and Birds of West Virginia Field Checklist.**

- **Field Identification Guide.** A good bird identification guide will be your most valuable piece of equipment. These books give details on color and plumage patterns and all the little “tricks” to identify each species. They also are made small enough so you can carry them in the field for immediate reference. Any bookstore should have several guides from which to choose.

- **Binoculars.** These are desirable but by no means required. A great deal can be learned without them, but many times it is impossible to identify a bird unless some small physical details can be seen. You also will have more fun seeing wild birds “close up.” The ideal binoculars should be compact, light and powerful enough to pick up the small details. Many people use 7x35 glasses (meaning the subject is magnified 7 times and the diameter of the lens is 35mm), 8x40 binoculars or a spotting scope, but the choice is up to you. Just make sure they are of good enough quality to prevent eye strain.

- **Notebook and Bird List.** Here



Drawing by Jim Kraus

again, these are not necessary, but they will aid in your bird identification and enjoyment of the sport. Notebooks can be used to record the markings or unusual behavior of a bird you see. Also, remembering what bird you observed is much easier when written down. There are a variety of bird lists you can keep including a life list, West Virginia list and a daily list. Write to the Wildlife Diversity Program for a checklist of West Virginia birds or download it from our website.

Procedure

Birding can be done in your backyard, in a forest, along the edges of water or in almost any area that satisfies some of the basic life requirements of birds. Each different habitat will provide interesting birds. The following suggestions should help you see more birds anywhere you go:

- **Season.** Spring is the best time of year to look for birds because many of the birds will be in bright breeding plumage and there is less foliage to block one’s view. Fall migration is another excellent time; however, it is more challenging to identify birds in the fall because some have molted and their colors are subdued. Make an effort to observe year-round so you do not miss certain species.

- **Time of Day.** The time between sun-up and mid-morning is usually the best time to look for birds. In winter the warmer part of the day is best.

- **Visit Different Habitats.** Birds are usually more numerous along the edges of different habitat types. Edges of fields, streams, lakes, woods and roads are all excellent places. Some types of habitats, such as wetlands and spruce forest, will yield different varieties of birds.

• **Go With an Experienced Bird Watcher.** Someone who knows birds can be of great help, but do not hold back if no such person is available. Membership in local bird clubs will put you in touch with experienced birders. Examples of the more established bird clubs include the Brooks Bird Club and local Audubon chapters throughout the state.

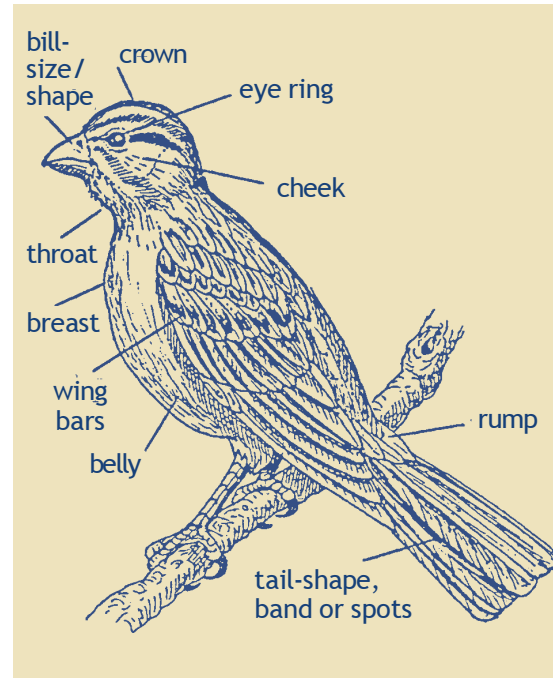
What To Notice About A Bird

The following characteristics of a bird's appearance and behavior will help you to identify it. For some birds, you may need all of the clues for identification, while for others, one characteristic may give it away. The order in which these features are noted is not important, but try to remember the combination of features each bird displays.

• **Color and Markings.** Most people notice the color of a bird first and, for a few birds, such as the electric orange of the Baltimore oriole, this may be all you will need. But many birds share the same color. For instance, many finches and sparrows are streaked brown. More than color alone is needed to distinguish these birds.

• **Field marks** are the physical markings that should be visible on a bird during its normal activities. These include features such as body and bill shape, wing and rump patches, tail bands, eye rings, wing bars and other eye catching patches of color. The graphic above illustrates where distinctive characteristics are most evident on a bird's body. Recognizing these characteristics, along with its color, will aid in identifying an individual bird.

• **Size.** Comparing the size and shape of the bird you are looking at to the size of a bird you are familiar with may aid in identifying



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it. Is it smaller than a crow? More slender than a blackbird?

• **Silhouette.** A bird's shape, specifically the shape of its head, wings or tail, may give clues to its identity.

• **Habits and Behavior.** Observing how and where a bird interacts with its surroundings is a valuable identification tool. Does it eat insects or seeds? Does it feed in a tree or from the ground? Does it hover like a hummingbird or soar like a vulture? Answering questions such as these also provide enjoyable lessons in natural history.

• **Habitat.** Some birds are found in only certain habitat types, so noting where the bird is found may help eliminate certain species. Is the bird in a coniferous or deciduous forest, open field or marsh? In treetops or on the ground?

• **Calls and Songs.** Ornithologists

recognize two kinds of bird vocalizations-calls and songs. Calls are generally brief sounds of only one or two notes, while a song is usually a rhythmic series of notes uttered in a recognizable pattern. Many birds have very distinctive songs and identification is possible without ever actually seeing them. Recordings of calls and songs are available from bookstores that sell field guides, on the Internet, or in the collections of many public libraries.

The only way to become proficient at birding is to practice. Birding may seem difficult at first, but with a little study you will be able to identify many birds with just a quick look or hearing a few notes of their song.

Get More Involved!

The WVDNR Wildlife Diversity program encourages participation in several different activities:

- Backyard Bird Counts
- Point Count Routes
- Audubon Christmas Bird Counts
- WV Important Bird Areas
- WV Partners in Flight

For more information on all these programs, check out Birding in WV on the WVDNR website or call 304-637-0245.



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West Virginia Division of
Natural Resources
Wildlife Diversity Program
P.O. Box 67
Elkins, WV 26241
304-637-0245